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ABSTRACT

Print journalism and journalism research have contributed many concepts, principles, and communication techniques to the field of political communication. An examination of the indexes of "Public Opinion Quarterly," "Journalism Quarterly," and the "Journal of Communication" through the mid-1960s indicates the evolution of the study of print media in the political process. Among the subjects given emphasis are media content and coverage, persuasion, news bias, newspaper influence on voters, and newspaper reporting of political public opinion polls. Other aspects of newspaper reporting that have been studied or proposed for study are the inadvertent altering of message content, gatekeeping (or news decision making), and the effectiveness of different media as information sources. A great deal of research has dealt with the effects of print media coverage. Among the many communication techniques created over the years, generally by print journalists, that facilitate coverage of political activity, are the press conference, the journalistic interview, and the press briefing. Students of political communication must now turn more attention toward redefining political communication. They must examine the communication of political information outside the campaign context, the relationship between government and the media, and the role of politics in communication. (GT)

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CONTRIBUTIONS OF PRINT JOURNALISM TO THE STUDY OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

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CONTRIBUTIONS OF PRINT JOURNALISM

TO THE STUDY OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Introduction

For the past several years, the Political Communication Division has demonstrated an increasing commitment to the study of political communication at the undergraduate as well as the graduate levels. The 1976 Portland meeting presented a panel discussing pedagogic approaches to political communication, and the panel was repeated three years later by the Teaching Committee of the division at the Philadelphia meeting.[1] Despite the numerous differences in pedagogic styles and approaches to the study of this highly interdisciplinary subject, a number of undercurrents remain. One of these is the considerable contribution of the print mass media--- what is traditionally defined as "journalism" in the literature of mass communication and political science. As the title of this paper suggests, there are many contributions of print journalism to the field of political communication in the form of concepts, principles, and communication skills. Nevertheless, many of these generalizations may be made about other academic areas contributing to political communication such as speech communication, computer science, political science, and broadcast journalism.

The approach in this discussion will be quite pragmatic, following the model offered by Frye in his 1979 presentation at Philadelphia. Political communication is viewed here in rather standard fashion--- broadly interpreted, and as Frye noted, sometimes ambiguous.[2] Political in an ordinary sense involves government policy and control. It involves

the science of government and the various strategies and techniques employed to develop policy and to gain and maintain control of a governmental unit. This naturally permits many topics and activities to enter into this point of view. The communication portion of the term is viewed in an equally broad fashion, since it may range from interpersonal to mass communication in the transmission of information about political activity--- both with the intent to influence the receiver of the message and without the intent to influence the receiver. Central to thinking on the definition is that political communication is ordinarily perceived in an active political sense, such as a campaign for public office, but that it does not necessarily have to be placed in this context. In fact, considering print contributions to the study of political communication commands that one look beyond the traditional political campaign to communication of a political nature in other contexts.

The mass media have their clearly defined subgroups. Reedy, in teaching political communication from a strategies approach, identifies four divisions: (1) printed media, (2) television, (3) radio, and (4) interpersonal communication, on the basis of understanding their roles to best fit the needs of the political communicator. Reedy defines the print media in the following manner:

> The printed media include all forms of written communication including mass mailings and not just the daily press. Considered as a whole, they have a flexibility which under many circumstances is invaluable. The daily press is regarded as a vehicle providing a picture of the world which is quite broad but very shallow; weekly magazines as placing events in a rough perspective; specialized publications as providing varying degrees of depth. This flexibility holds forth a number of advantages:

(a) Even though they are no longer the principle channel for mass communication, the printed media remain the best channel for communicating ideas on a large scale.

(b) The printed media permit a "targeting" of concepts upon specific audiences, selected either by interest or education level.

(c) The printed media have a "believability" quotient that is quite high--despite the often heard disclaimer that "you can't believe anything you read in the newspapers."[3]

Regardless of how courses in political communication are taught, or the various research themes in political communication, print contributions remain salient in the face of broadcasting and other mass forms of communication. As Clarke and Fredin noted, "Contrary to public opinion, research demonstrates that the public relies on newspapers somewhat more than on television for political news. Both vehicles are especially important in state and local affairs untouched by magazine journalism."[4] Since focus in many political communication courses and much research continues on the print media, we shall take a brief look at some of the concepts, principles, and communication skills contributed by the print media.

Concepts, Principles, and Communication Skills

A look at the indexes of Public Opinion Quarterly, Journalism Quarterly, and the Journal of Communication through the mid 1960s will suggest certain early emphases and the evolution of the study of the newspaper and other print media in the political process. Among the key words, representing many of the concepts and principles which have evolved, are medium content, medium coverage, and persuasion. Still another area originally associated with newspapers is political poll reporting. Research conducted by Casey,[5] Dabney,[6] Rosten,[7] and Mott,[8]

are among the original reports emphasizing the importance of coverage by newspapers in political campaigns. Other articles, of course, discuss political coverage in non-campaign contexts.[9]

Similarly, research reports on bias and influence are plentiful discussing, among other things, how these characteristics of news reporting in the print media may work to persuade voters--- as early political communication research on the print media centered on attitude change.[10] Studies focused on the editorial, letters to the editor, and the more objective news content of the publication as these forms of communication led to influence on the voter in a campaign.[11]

While emphasis in the last fifteen years has grown considerably, early research exemplified by Public Opinion Quarterly, Journalism Quarterly, and the Journal of Communication demonstrates a considerable interest in presentation of political public opinion polls in the mass media, particularly daily newspapers. Early studies have looked at how polls can assist daily newspaper coverage,[12] as well as the accuracy of polls,[13] and the use of public opinion polls.[14] Since communication of poll results has continued to grow in the past two decades particularly, the study and emphasis on political polls and the political information contained in them has also increased. A search of the literature of journals such as those mentioned above will underline this point.

Print media research in these areas--- content, coverage, persuasion, and the polls--- has been limited almost exclusively to daily metropolitan newspapers. Study of news magazines, the suburban and rural daily newspaper, the weekly newspaper, books, and other forms of mass political communication--- such as direct mailings, press releases, and posted bills--- has been comparatively non-existent.

Frye suggests another important concept involving the newspaper in the political communication process. He suggests placing emphasis on the mediating impact the newspaper has on communication on political campaign information in discussing his approach to political communication instruction:

> And, the complexity of the mediational process has created doubt as to the probabilities of message content being effectively transmitted from a national political figure to his ultimate national audience. For example, a political speech is covered by press reporters, who submit their reactions ("on the screen reports") to editors, who edit . . . the material in consideration of its significance, availability of space, and other factors. Then finally the public receives a press report, but since the content has been subjected to the mediational process, there is the constant danger that the "message" will become changed, altered, modified, or distorted one way or another.[15]

Much of this mediating influence literature has developed out of sociological research conducted in the 1940s by Lewin and others, who studied the gates through which information flows in decision making.[16] White's benchmark study of the gatekeeping performed by a daily newspaper slot editor set the stage for a move into mass communication news decision-making research, and a generation of studies followed, both in and out of the political context.[17] But as White's study determined, and those to follow, much of the decision making involves public affairs news. While gatekeeping, or news decision-making research, has clearly moved away from the daily newspaper to broadcasting and news magazines, as indicated by Gans' recent work,[18] original emphasis and a significant level of interest seems to remain with the print media.

Weaver and Buddenbaum note additional important concepts in the study of the uses and effects of the mass media in a political con-

text. They wrote, "Newspapers seem to be more effective than television at increasing the levels of political knowledge and at telling people what issues to be concerned about in a political campaign. And newspaper endorsements . . . are associated with increased vote totals in elections, especially in non-partisan elections where there are few controversial issues."[19] Another conclusion which they reached was that newspaper use is more associated with political activity, such as voting, than other mass media. Weaver and Buddenbaum identified three major uses of the mass media by consumers: (1) for knowledge, (2) for diversion, and (3) for communication. In the context of political communication, knowledge seems most obvious. Early research in diffusion is noted in describing how political information is acquired. Newspapers are proposed as primarily in-depth information sources and television, in contrast, as a surveillance medium, they argue.[20]

There is a wide variety of communication techniques created over the years which facilitate coverage of political activity---many of these having roots in the print media. These techniques, most also originated by print journalists, are now viewed as important vehicles for dissemination of political information for all mass media. One such technique is the press conference. Press conferences are used regularly as a new creating event in a political campaign, but are also used outside of campaigns by officials in both the public and private sectors to state positions, release general information, refute claims, and the like in any of several contexts--- formal scheduled meetings, informal scheduled conferences, or more extemporaneous form. Nimmo has noted that these conferences serve several purposes, including news creation that the individual holding the conference desires, announcement of

official positions by the proper public servant, control over scheduling of the release of information, and they provide the individual with a controlled environment for the event to take place.[21]

The journalistic interview originated as a print media reporting device in the early nineteenth century,[22] and it obviously remains an important and widely used technique for gathering political information. A less public event than the press conference, this activity is more often an interpersonal event involving a reporter and a source. While this is no longer the print reporter's exclusive information collection technique, the interview and its related forms have certainly remained important to communication of political information.

Sandwiched between the press conference and the interview is the press briefing, commonly held by government officials to provide background information. Often this type of information dissemination has led to various levels of attribution of political statements--- a development arising from secrecy during World War II and continuing to its present form at all levels of government--- such as on the record (with full attribution); for attribution, but not for direct quotation; attribution to a spokesman for the source (but not the official source); and background (not for attribution with any identification); or the extreme form, off the record (not for publication at all). These press briefings may occur with a group of reporters or on a one-to-one basis. Regardless, the battle for information against secrecy in government has long been waged and remains a problem in the communication of political information and in the study of political communication.[23]

Turning attention toward the effects of newspaper and other print media coverage, there is a wealth of literature upon which to draw con-

clusions. Weaver and Buddenbaum reviewed more than one hundred uses and effects research reports and determined that newspaper exposure:

(1) will primarily reinforce pre-existing political attitudes and contribute somewhat to formation of new attitudes;

(2) will increase political knowledge, more effectively tell people what issues to think about in a political campaign;

(3) affect political behavior as they find newspaper endorsements associated with victory in elections.[24]

Nimmo points to the importance of effects research in the development of political communication as a field of study. One of four "research antecedents for political communication was the study of effects of mass communication. Inquiries produced evidence of minimal consequences of communication on political behavior," he wrote.[25] Obviously, a generation of research has been published on the effects of mass communication, including Klapper's well-known analysis,[26] summarizing, as Nimmo calls it, "the relative effects of presentation of issues, ordering of arguments, social groups, audience characteristics, persuader credibility, etc. upon attitude change."[27] Certainly the arguments over the validity of studies establishing direct effects of political communication continue, and will do so indefinitely. Published research still emphasizes this approach to a very limited extent.

Conclusions

The many concepts, principles, and communication skills brought from the print media to political communication are varied. This paper has attempted to highlight only a select number of these, which are by no means all of the possibilities. But what is here generates a major

concern, an area important to the discipline of political communication for the next generation of students and researchers. We are rapidly learning, as Nimmo noted, much about political communication in the areas of the role of the mass media in political campaigns and the relationship between governments and the news media.[28] Emphasis has been on technique---such as the planning of media campaigns. And while Nimmo says even this is not widely successful in telling us generally what works in campaigning, scholars studying the relationship of government and the mass media have also not done well at giving those interested in the broader interpretation of political communication much depth and new horizons for study.

Herein lies the problem. If we are to continue to develop understanding and knowledge of the print media, particularly daily newspapers, the news magazines, and books, we must turn more attention toward re-defining political communication. We must look at the communication of political information outside of the campaign context. The daily newspaper, and to a lesser degree, the news magazines, often are most effective with communication of information regarding such things as court decisions, the various proclamations of federal and state governmental regulatory agencies, new and pending legislation, and the routine administration of all branches of government at all levels---international, national, regional, state, and local. This is the variety of political communication which we, as students and researchers of the political and communication processes, take for granted. This is the political communication which is an ongoing, dynamic process. General questions about this genre of political communication persist:

(1) How is non-campaign political information communicated?

(2) How much political information is contained in the print media in a non-campaign context? For a broader inquiry, how much political information appears in all mass media outside of campaigns?

(3) Who are the users of this information? How is it used? And what are the effects upon the user?

(4) What are the public's agendas on regular, or routine governmental activity? And how do the print media work to set the agendas of readers on non-campaign political issues?

These are not new inquiries. Research has examined these areas previously. But the scattered studies have yet to really establish where the relationship between government and the news media outside of political campaigns really stands. Rivers, Miller, and Gandy noted still other shortcomings. They argued that:

> (1) There is too much focus on individual attitudes and individual characteristics.
> (2) There is too much attention to attitudes, and too little to actual behavior.
> (3) There is too much reliance on interviews, questionnaires, or other subject-supplied information.
> And (4) There is too much taking-for-granted of theories about governmental operations (i.e., how government actually operates, and too much acceptance of anecdotes as evidence of the ways journalists operate).[29]

And furthermore, Rivers, Miller, and Gandy state that there are major questions which students of political communication should be asking about regulatory agencies, about the courts and the legal system, and about the informal pressures brought to bear by public officials. In their view, for example, we should also investigate the impact of the media on government by looking at how media publicity influences officials in decision making--- what conditions prevail, the differences of the particular media, and the nature of the problems created.[30]

Sanders and Kaid raise a final point. They stated, "Relatively few theorists have taken up the challenge implicit in the assertion that all communication is political, and, that instead of investigating the role of communication in politics, researchers should be investigating the role of politics in communication.[31] Thus, applying this to the print media in political communication, we need to shift focus to how politics influences the communication of political information. Whatever the approach, we have many unanswered questions remaining about the print media in political communication. As students of political communication, it is our responsibility to pursue the answers. A change of focus must be considered to fully understand the role and the contributions of print journalism in the field of political communication.

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31. Keith R. Sanders and Lynda Lee Kaid, "Political Communication Theory and Research: An Overview 1976-77," in Brent D. Ruben, ed., Communication Yearbook 2, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1978), p. 385.

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